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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews results of a questionnaire distributed to literacy workers in rural Alberta (Canada) to ascertain their views on rural literacy. The questionnaire was designed to identify: (1) distinctive features of the issue of adult illiteracy in rural areas; (2) the strengths of literacy efforts in rural Alberta; (3) the weaknesses of literacy efforts in rural Alberta; (4) additional help needed; and (5) the most needed research efforts. The results are based on the responses of 24 people (38% response rate), and were analyzed by grouping points made in the responses. Respondents saw rural literacy as distinct from urban literacy in that the former had greater difficulties in keeping the illiterate confidential and in overcoming geographic distance. Respondents identified such a diversity of strengths that no single point is echoed by more than two other respondents. Points mentioned were good volunteers, individualized instruction, good support and networking, and a cooperative media. Common weaknesses included lack of confidentiality, geographic distance, lack of resources, and lack of mass media to promote programs. Concerning additional help, respondents mentioned an honoraria for tutors and other funding concerns. The most frequently identified research need was for statistics to document the needs for literacy programs. Similar responses were given to rural distinction questions and to rural weakness questions and collaboration between researchers and rural literacy workers was proposed. (KS)

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Rural Literacy Issues in Alberta

by

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for

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Rural Literacy Issues in Alberta

Little publicly available information exists on rural literacy in Canada. To prepare for the Literacy Issues in Rural Canada working conference in Ottawa, May 10-13, 1991, I distributed a questionnaire to literacy workers in rural Alberta to ascertain their views on rural literacy.

Method

After defining "rural" loosely as "outside of cities," and after explaining what would be done with the (anonymous) responses, the questionnaire presented the following five questions with one-quarter page of space for each answer:

1. In your view, what is distinctive about the issue of adult illiteracy in rural areas as opposed to in cities?

2. In your view, what are the common or usual strengths of literacy efforts in rural Alberta?

3. In your view, what are the common or usual weaknesses of literacy efforts in rural Alberta?

4. If you could receive additional help in your area combating rural illiteracy, what one thing would you most want help with?

5. If you could research anything about rural literacy, what one thing would you most like to find out?

The first batch of questionnaires was placed in the registration packets of people attending the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta conference in Calgary, Alberta, March 6-8, 1991. Seventeen of an estimated fifty possible respondents completed the questionnaire. (Four rural literacy

coordinators worked as a group to complete one questionnaire; I counted their answers only once.) The survey plus a self-addressed, stamped envelope was mailed to each Regional Representative of the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy who lived outside of Edmonton and Calgary. Regional Reps based in smaller cities are responsible for both urban and rural areas, so I allowed them the opportunity to respond as people knowledgeable about rural literacy. Seven of thirteen possible respondents answered. The response rate was 38%, too low to make confident generalizations. Because the questionnaire asked thought-provoking questions requiring written answers, I was not surprised that the 24 people who did answer the survey did so with considerable detail and passion.

To analyze the data, I focussed on each of the five questions in turn. I wrote down each of the points made in response to a question. Most respondents made more than one point in each answer to the first four questions. Fortunately, many respondents answered in point form, and many others used clear transitions between points. Sometimes I condensed a point to one sentence, as in the following example. One person answered Question 1 as follows:

> It is often difficult to convince people in rural areas that there is a literacy issue. The communities are small, and if their is a concern, then a friend or family member could very easily be involved. In the cities it is easier to believe that there is a problem in the poor neighborhoods, the large group of Immigrants. Many times we don't

> want to see the obvious. [This and other quotations retain original spelling and punctuation.]

I counted this as one point, made in the first sentence.

Sometimes I identified more than one point when the author did not clearly signal more than one. The same respondent as above answered Question 3 as follows:

> Because of the lack of resources we tend to loose good people due to burn out. You have to be creative, innovative all of the time, it seems. Often you feel like you are on your own. The nearest person who really understands what you are doing could be an hour away.

I counted this as two points, one about the stress of having to be creative with limited resources, and the other about being isolated.

When all of the points were listed for each question, I grouped points that were essentially the same.

Results

For each question, responses are listed in descending order of the number of times they were mentioned. Points mentioned only once are not included, except for the singular responses to Question 5, a question which evoked relatively little response.

1. What is <u>distinctive</u> about the issue of adult illiteracy in rural areas as opposed to in cities?

(10 responses) Confidentiality: Because privacy is more difficult to maintain in small communities, low literate adults are hesitant to seek help with reading and writing for fear of being "found out" by the community, and

literacy programs must be particularly careful to maintain confidentiality. [These two ideas were inextricably intertwined in some responses.]

(6) Distance: Students, tutors, and coordinators are often geographically separated.

(4) Lack of awareness: It is difficult to convince rural people that there is an illiteracy problem.

(4) There is a lack of material suited to rural groups.

(3) One program must serve many diverse groups; or, from another perspective, students lack alternative programs.

(2) There is a lack of resources, both people and materials.

(2) There is a lack of special services and facilities.

(2) Motivation for entering a literacy program is personal self-improvement more than vocational.

(2) Farmers, a unique, non-urban occupational group, are particularly difficult to reach because of their self-sufficient attitude and the seasonal demands of farming.

(2) Rural people may not be required to read and write as often as city people.

Seven statements were singular. There were 44 points in answer to Question 1.

2. What are the common or usual <u>strengths</u> of literacy efforts in rural Alberta?

(3 responses) There is a good bank of volunteers.

(3) One-to-one, individualized instruction is common.

(3) There is good support and networking among programs.

(3) The media are very cooperative.

(3) Students, tutors, and coordinators are close-knit.

(2) Tutors are caring, concerned individuals.

(2) Instruction has to be flexible and innovative.

(2) The community supports special events.

(2) There is strong community support for programs and students.

Eleven statements were singular. There were 34 points in answer to Question 2.

3. What are the common or usual weaknesses of literacy efforts in rural Alberta?

(5 responses) Confidentiality: Learners are afraid to come forward for fear their lack of literacy skills will become known in the community; confidentiality is difficult to maintain.

(5) Distance: Student, tutors, and coordinators are scattered, and all are distant from some needed resources.

(5) There is a lack of resources--time and money; there is insufficient government money.

(3) There is a lack of mass media to promote literacy programs.

(2) Professional isolation: It is difficult and costly to access professional development opportunities.

(2) Few alternative programs exist for learners.

Fourteen responses were singular. There were 36 points in answer to this question.

4. If you could receive additional help in your area combating rural illiteracy, what one thing would you most want help with?

(6 responses) Promotion to recruit learners.

(4) Honoraria for tutors.

(4) Money for more coordination.

(2) Ongoing, secure funding.

(2) More money for tutor training.

Sixteen responses were singular. There were 34 points in answer to this question.

5. If you could research anything about rural literacy, what one thing would you most like to find out?

(4 responses) Statistics documenting need for literacy programs.

(3) How to get people to become involved in literacy programs.

(1) The impact of adult literacy on the family unit.

(1) A salary and work grid for literacy workers, i.e., base line for workloads and appropriate compensation.

(1) "Are we overselling literacy?"

(1) "Why are some communities so apathetic to the problem of illiteracy and how can it be solved?"

(1) "Where other programs are housed and what their offices look like."

(1) "Don't spend money on research! Find a way to put it to immediate and direct benefit to small, struggling programs."

There were 13 points in answer to this question.

Discussion

Question 1 is the only question on which there was significant consensus. Rural literacy workers see rural literacy as distinct in two salient aspects: confidentiality and distance.

Respondents identified what is distinctive about the issue of adult literacy in rural areas largely in negative terms. What is distinctive is almost the same as the common weaknesses of rural literacy efforts:

Distinctive	Weaknesses
1. Confidentiality	1. Confidentiality
2. Distance	2. Distance
3. Lack of awareness	3. Lack of resources
4. Lack of rural material	4. Lack of mass media to promote literacy programs

This correspondence raises the question: Can we frame the issue of adult illiteracy in rural areas so that we see more positive features?

Respondents identified such a diversity of strengths of literacy efforts that no single point is echoed by more than two other respondents. Lest this create the impression that all is well, note that most of the strengths have countervailing weaknesses:

1. There is a good supply of caring volunteers, but, as one respondent put it, an important weakness is "relatively 'untrained' tutors winging it."

2. Three respondents say that there is good networking among programs, but other people complain of isolation.

3. The local media are very cooperative, yet literacy workers envy the variety and reach of media outlets in the cities.

4. Students, tutors, and coordinators are close-knit according to some, but too scattered and isolated according to others.

5. Instruction may be flexible and innovative, but the stress of providing such teaching with limited resources is a major problem.

6. Some communities support literacy programs, students, and special literacy events, while others resist even the notion that literacy is an issue.

While Question 4 asks about additional help desired, it also functions as a reliability check. Clearly, respondents completed the questionnaire in a careful, consistent manner, for the match between additional help desired and previously identified strengths and weaknesses is quite good. Help with "promotion to recruit learners" matches with the ubiquitous concern for confidentiality and learners stepping forward to enter programs. Help with "money for more coordination" addresses, in part, the strong concern for problems of distance. "Honoraria for tutors" is a response to the perception that volunteers tutors are a major strength of rural literacy programs.

Although the above 3 calls for help account for 14 responses, the other 20 responses suggest that rural literacy workers are not in clear agreement on what additional help they want.

Relatively few people answered Question 5 about needed research. Those who responded often did not give the quality answers and rich detail given to other questions. It seems obvious to say it, but rural literacy workers generally are not educational researchers.

Research on rural literacy should be conducted in cooperation with rural literacy workers. Cooperation means that researchers establish a dialogue with literacy workers so that the workers can contribute ideas for the research agenda. Cooperation means assisting literacy workers to think enough like researchers so that the workers can participate fruitfully in research projects.